

# Monitoring and managing the great desert skink at Nyirripi

THREATENED SPECIES NETWORK COMMUNITY GRANTS PROFILE



Previous work in the southern Tanami Desert indicated that several threatened fauna species were surviving better near the Indigenous community of Nyirripi than in more remote areas, and it was thought that this might be as a result of traditional hunting practices such as patch burning still regularly used in this region. Tangentyere Council Inc, in partnership with the Central Land Council and Birds Australia and with the assistance of a Threatened Species Network Community Grant, aimed to examine the distribution and abundance of great desert skink (warrarna) in relation to the fire history of the area, and to facilitate the transfer of Traditional Knowledge about warrarna to younger generations of Nyirripi residents.



## Great desert skink (*warrarna*, *tjakura*, *mulyamiji*) (*Egernia kintorei*)

Commonwealth Status: Vulnerable (EPBC Act 1999)

The great desert skink is a large reddish-tan burrowing lizard that can grow up to 44 cm long. They occur generally on red sandplains and sand ridges of the western deserts of central Australia. These skinks seem to prefer a mosaic landscape of different aged vegetation and to inhabit sites that have been burnt in the previous three to fifteen years. The main threats to this species appear to be inappropriate fire regimes and feral predators. The warrarna is a totem or "dreaming" animal for some of the Pintubi women at Nyirripi.

### Project outcomes

Great desert skink warrens were surveyed and the core area and habitat for skinks in the region identified through the mapping of over a hundred warrens. Subsequent surveys have revealed as many as thirty burrows per square kilometre, suggesting a population size of at least 3000 animals in the Newhaven/Nyirripi area, making it one of the most important populations of this species. The fire history of the area was mapped and the distribution and abundance of warrarna were examined in relation to this. Cultural information about the great desert skinks was recorded and Nyirripi school students participated in the surveys where they were taught about the warrarna by Aboriginal elders. Books about the project were produced and given to the schools as a resource.

Using the knowledge gained from this project and with the assistance of a more recent TSN Community Grant, a fire management plan has been prepared for nearby Newhaven Reserve (now managed by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy) to implement appropriate patch-burning for great desert skinks in areas where fire has been actively excluded for the past 50 years.

McAlpin, S. (2001) Recovery Plan for the Great Desert Skink. Arid Lands Environment Centre, Alice Springs. <http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/recovery/great-desert-skink/index.html#22>

Tangentyere Council Inc (2005) Final report to the TSN on "Monitoring and Managing the Great Desert Skink at Nyirripi" (TSN reference NT05/103)

### Outputs

Area surveyed: 90,000 ha

Volunteers participated: 21

Person days worked: 170

### Products

- Photo report for Nyirripi Community and Newhaven Reserve
- Article for Wingspan magazine
- Audio-recording of Great Desert Skink Dreaming Song
- Great Desert Skink Dreaming painting

### Expenditure

TSN grant funds - \$21,384.00

Proponent - \$27,841.00

Total project - \$49,225.00